

What I'm concerned about is that protectionist tendency and isolationist tendency that could emerge in both our countries as well as in Mexico, which would make it harder for us to realize the benefits of collaboration together, make it harder for us to, kind of, grow together. And that would be not beneficial for the hemisphere, and frankly, it will make it a lot harder for future Americans and Canadians and Mexicans to compete with the Chinese, for example.

And so there is a relationship which exists which needs to be protected and nurtured and streamlined and made more efficient, and that's really what the discussions will be in Cancun.

Canadian Government

Q. A quick last question for you, I don't know if you're going to take the bait on this one.

The President. Probably not.

Q. Okay. [*Laughter*]

The President. Now that you've let me know—

Q. I let the cat out of the bag.

The President. —let me know there was a hook coming. [*Laughter*]

Q. Are you any happier with the Conservative Government in Canada than a liberal government?

The President. I am—I respect the will of the Canadian people, and as I say, you know, this is—there were some tense times when I made the decision to go to war in Iraq, and I understand that. I'm not the—I fully understand why people, not only in Canada but in the United States, expressed deep concern about the use of force to protect ourselves. I stand by the decision. I think it's the right decision. And therefore, I wasn't surprised when I heard, you know, members of political parties in both our countries express deep concern about it.

Having said all that, however, in the midst of turbulent times, my relationships with the two Prime Ministers, prior to Stephen Harper, were good, solid relationships. We had candid discussions; we were friendly toward each other; we shared the same values of human rights and human dignity and freedom to speak and freedom to worship.

So I view the relationship with Canada as a very strong and important relationship for the United States of America. It's a relationship that we should never take for granted, and I'm confident the Canadians won't take our relationship for granted. And it's a relationship that needs attention and care. And there are problems that arise, like softwood lumber. Hopefully we'll get that solved. But we've also had a BSE issue that came up on my watch, which we solved, as well as potatoes. We had a potato issue when I first became President of the United States, that we worked through with Prime Minister Chretien.

Q. Mr. President, you've been very generous with your time, and I appreciate it.

The President. Well, thanks for coming.

Q. Thank you.

The President. Welcome to Washington.

Q. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 2:55 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to former Prime Ministers Jean Chretien and Paul Martin, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 29.

Remarks Following Discussions With President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria

March 29, 2006

President Bush. Mr. President, welcome back to the Oval Office. We have just had a discussion that covered a lot of topics. Every time I meet with the President, he brings a fresh perspective about the politics and the situation on the continent of Africa, and I want to thank you. I want to thank you for your leadership.

The President and I talked about Darfur and the Sudan, and I made it very clear to him that we're deeply concerned about the humiliation, the rape, the murder that is taking place among the—against the citizens of Darfur. He agreed. And I want to thank you for your compassion.

We talked and strategized about how to move forward, how to make it clear to the Sudanese Government that there will be a

international response in working toward a peace. We talked about a dual track, that the rebels must come together and negotiate with the Government, and at the same time, we talked about bolstering the AU peace-keeping force with a blue-helmeted force. And I explained to him my desire to have a NATO overlay to make sure that force is robust.

We talked about economic development. Of course, I brought up energy to the President. He's—he and I talked about the situation in the Nigerian Delta. He talked to me about his strategy to deal with the energy issue.

And finally, I appreciate the decision he made regarding Charles Taylor. In my visit last week with the President of Liberia, we talked about Charles Taylor. The fact that Charles Taylor will be brought to justice in a court of law will help Liberia and is a signal, Mr. President, of your deep desire for there to be peace in your neighborhood.

So welcome to the Oval Office. It's good to have you here, sir.

President Obasanjo. Thank you very much. And as usual, I want to thank you for the warm and hardy reception that you have accorded us.

The areas that I would call the areas of concern, by the time I arrived here last night, seemed to have been definably dealt with by this morning, particularly the issue of Charles Taylor. And as I said to you about a minute—a few minutes ago, Charles Taylor should be landing in Liberia by now, which should start putting the issue of Charles Taylor behind all of us.

I appreciate the understanding of everybody and the way that the issue has been handled. I met the press earlier today to actually give what was our own position and how we were hoping to deal with the issue of Charles Taylor's disappearance. And of course, I do not agree, must disagree that we have been negligent in the way we handled the Charles Taylor issue. If we had been negligent, then Charles Taylor would have got away. He would not have been arrested if there was connivance or condonation on our part.

Having said that, we, of course, talked about the general situation of peace and se-

curity in the West Africa subregion, and how West Africa subregion, with Charles Taylor issue behind us, how West Africa subregion is gradually becoming a haven of peace. We have dealt with Togo; we have dealt with Guinea-Bissau; we have dealt with Sierra Leone. Hopefully, we are now dealing with Liberia. And things seem to be going fairly well in Cote D'Ivoire. Well, of course, we are keenly watching the situation in Guinea—Conakry.

Then we looked at the rest of Africa, particularly Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the Great Lakes, generally. Then we talked about the issue of development, particularly security—supplies, security, stability, and also price stability of hydrocarbons from the Gulf of Guinea area, and how we are working hard to establish a Gulf of Guinea commission that will also deal with the issue of reconciling and dealing with ending misunderstanding among those in that—among countries that are in the Gulf of Guinea, how we can protect and how we can monitor what happens in that area, because the hydrocarbon we need for our own development and we need for the economic development and progress of the world. We are moving in this regard not only by ourselves but also by our—with our development partners.

Then, of course, we talked about NEPAD, which is where we work with the G-8 and—politically and individually.

And we—I briefed the President on what we are doing with the Niger Delta, which is very important. And we are very grateful that the measures we are taking, which are essentially socioeconomic measures to address some of the grievances, identified grievances, will resolve the issues of the Niger Delta.

I think these are some of the points. And I think—I want to thank President for remaining his charming self. [*Laughter*]

President Bush. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President Charles Taylor of Liberia, who was arrested on March 29 in Nigeria on United Nations war crimes charges; and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia.

Remarks to Freedom House and a Question-and-Answer Session

March 29, 2006

The President. Thank you. Please be seated. I shouldn't be so instructive to the diplomatic corps. [Laughter] Peter, thank you for your warm introduction. Thank you for your commitment to freedom. It turns out freedom runs pretty deep in Peter's family. I don't know if you know this or not, but his son is a Marine First Lieutenant named Elliot Ackerman. He fought in the battle of Fallujah. I know you're proud of your son, and I'm proud to be the Commander in Chief of men and women who volunteer to defend our own freedom.

I appreciate very much the men and women of Freedom House. For more than 60 years, this organization has been a tireless champion for liberty. You've been a clear voice for the oppressed across the world. At Freedom House, you understand that the only path to lasting peace is the expansion of freedom and liberty.

Free societies are peaceful societies. When governments are accountable to their own citizens, when people are free to speak and assemble, when minorities are protected, then justice prevails. And so does the cause of peace.

Freedom House was founded on the principle that no nation is exempt from the demands of human dignity. And you're carrying that message across the world, from Africa to China to Belarus and beyond. At Freedom House, you also understand free societies do not take root overnight, especially in countries that suffer from decades of tyranny and repression. You understand that free elections are an instrument of change; yet they're only the first step. So as you press for democratic change across the world, you're helping new democracies build free institutions they need to overcome the legacies of tyranny and dictatorship.

I want to thank you for your vital work. You're making a significant contribution to the security of our country. I'm also honored that we've got distinguished members of the legislative body with us, particularly Senators—John Warner, who is the chairman of the Armed Services Committee; Senator

Dick Lugar, who is the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and, of course, Senator Ted Stevens. I thank the Members from the House and Senate who have joined these distinguished Senators. I appreciate you taking time to come and listen to me. Just listen to me a little more often. [Laughter]

I particularly want to pay homage to Ambassador Max Kampelman. Thank you very much. I was telling the Ambassador, right before I came over I was having a little visit with my Chief of Staff-to-be, Josh Bolten. It turns out that Josh's dad and the Ambassador were lifelong friends. And as I came over here, he said, "You make sure that you say hello to one of the finest men our country has ever produced." So, Mr. Chairman, on behalf of a grateful President and a grateful Chief of Staff-to-be, thank you for serving our country.

I appreciate the other members of the Freedom House Board of Trustees, and I thank the diplomatic corps for joining us as well.

We meet at a time of war but also at a moment of great hope. In our world and due in part to our efforts, freedom is taking root in places where liberty was unimaginable a couple of years ago. Just 25 years ago, at the start of the 1980s, there were only 45 democracies on the face of the Earth. Today, Freedom House reports there are 122 democracies, and more people now live in liberty than ever before.

The advance of freedom is the story of our time, and we're seeing new chapters written before our eyes. Since the beginning of 2005, we've witnessed remarkable democratic changes across the globe. The people of Afghanistan have elected their first democratic Parliament in more than a generation. The people of Lebanon have recovered their independence and chosen their leaders in free elections. The people of Kyrgyzstan have driven a corrupt regime from power and voted for democratic change. The people of Liberia have overcome decades of violence and are now led by the first woman elected as a head of state in any African nation. And the courageous people of Iraq have gone to the polls not once, not twice, but three times, choosing a transitional government, a